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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the movement to "improve" schools by means of legislating mandatory testing and then publishing students' results in local newspapers and on the Internet. Students who attend schools where the standards are not met are often the ones who would benefit most from a broad-based language arts program. These students are left to struggle in language classes where test preparation is the center of the curriculum. At the same time, technology is receiving much attention in the hope that increased use of computers will somehow improve test scores. The paper recounts the experiences of a new adviser to a club which publishes a high school literary magazine as he manages to increase the number of students working on the magazine over a 4-year period. He began with 10 students and now has 60 students working on the prize-winning publication. The paper contends it is not too late to ensure that students' feelings and ideas are not engulfed in the tidal wave of testing and technology. It concludes that teachers/advisors can help students work together to create literary magazines, newspapers, yearbooks, classroom collections of their work, and e-zines, and then incorporate their material into the curricula. A discussion forum is attached. (NKA)

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ED 443 092

Uniting Students to Subvert the Testing and Technology Craze.

by Robert Miller

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Uniting Students to Subvert the Testing and Technology Craze

An Invited Commentary

Robert Miller
East Side Union High School District

Note: After reading this article, please visit the transcript of the discussion forum to view readers' comments. For a list of postings on related topics, click here.

In individual states across the U.S., there is a movement to "improve" the schools by means of legislating mandatory testing and then publishing students' results in local newspapers and on the Internet. In California, for example, new laws have produced a timetable that calls for schools to meet certain requirements for student achievement, as measured by scores on state-mandated tests, within a particular period. This will result in punishment for students who attend schools where the standards are not met. These students, often the ones who would benefit most from a broad-based language arts program, are left to struggle in language classes where test preparation is the center of the curriculum. In the future, California high school students will not be able to graduate until they pass the test.

Testing defines the curriculum. Administrators are demanding that teachers spend more time instructing students on test-taking techniques and that they focus on content likely to be included in the tests. At the same time, technology is receiving increased attention, and in many high schools, spaces in the library are being cleared of books to make room for ugly gray boxes that emit a dull green light. The hope is that the increased use of this impersonal technology will somehow improve test scores, and thus the students will be "better educated."

We are quickly approaching the time when high school students will come to believe that success on a test is the mark of being educated, and that computers are the single tool essential for a "quality" education. It's time for students to organize themselves, to use activist tactics to take back some control over their educational destinies and to provide alternatives to the testing and technology craze. Small groups of activist students armed with their own good prose and poetry can influence the hearts and minds of the whole student body -- and their schools' administrations. As teachers, part of our mission must be to convince students that education and academic satisfaction do not develop from computerized learning and test scores.

Four years ago, when I transferred to a different high school in our district, I became a co-advisor to a club that produces the school's literary magazine. My predecessor had been so overcommitted at the school that the last magazine produced in her tenure had fallen behind in production and was only available for sale during the final week before summer vacation. Needless to say, at the start of my first year as an advisor, we had a huge box of unsold magazines from the year before. That year, the club had one male and nine female members; there were five Asian Americans, two Mexican Americans, and three Anglos, and all ten dressed in the teenage activist uniform of baggy pants and oversized shirts.

During the first year, we advertised, raised money, and produced a 45-page magazine. We were relentless in our efforts to get students to contribute prose, poetry, and artwork for the magazine. The club members visited anyone and everyone on campus who might be able to provide material -- including teachers and students learning English as a second language. Our literary magazine was a winner, and we even submitted it to the Columbia Scholastic Press Association for consideration for its medalist awards. Of course, everyone who submits a magazine wins either a bronze, silver, or gold medalist certificate. That first year our magazine received a bronze. We had the certificate mounted on a wooden plaque and displayed it in the main office.

I should mention that CSPA is one of several organizations that judge student literary magazines. Based at Columbia University Press, the CSPA was founded in 1925 to provide services to the student newspapers, yearbooks, and literary magazines produced at its member schools and colleges. The organization runs an extensive awards program.

The second year, 25 students signed up to work on the magazine. We advertised, raised money, and received

over 200 submissions from the student body -- poetry, short stories, and essays, most in English but some written in other languages. The size of the printed magazine grew to 68 pages. That year we won a silver medalist certificate from the Columbia Scholastic Press Association.

We began to broaden the scope of our activities. A former student at the school had just published her first book, and we invited her to come to speak to us. The students had a wonderful time learning what it was like to be a professional author. We invited contributors to the magazine, teachers, and friends to a party where we sold copies at a reduced price.

During the year, we realized that we needed help with our campaign to win the hearts and minds of the student body with our literary endeavors. We reached out to other groups at the school who had an interest in writing and publishing. Student activists and advisors from the yearbook staff, the newspaper, and the magazine formed a Publications Council and met to develop our strategy. The object uniting the groups was pepperoni pizza. As is common on many high school campuses, the newspaper and yearbook staffs did not trust each other. At our school they were civil. If the animosity had been more intense, I would have resorted to thick-crust pepperoni pizza with extra cheese.

The Publications Council decided to hold a short story contest the following year, modeling it on a contest held by a local newspaper. The twist was that submissions could be no longer than 55 words. The winners would receive a yearbook as a prize, the magazine would print the best submissions, and the newspaper staff would photograph the authors. All three groups provided money for a cash prize. The process of uniting the publications on campus had begun.

At the start of my third year with the club, membership had grown to 37. Two months into the school year, we had received about 200 entries in the short story contest. Representatives from the newspaper, yearbook, and magazine met during a teacher in-service day to decide on the winners. This time we ordered pizzas with a few more toppings. We were on a roll. At a lunch-time ceremony a few days later, we announced the winners. As an unexpected bonus for the literary magazine, the winner of the contest became a member of the staff during the 1998-99 school year.

Members of our magazine staff were invited to speak at the annual conference of the Columbia Scholastic Press Association, so we raised the money to send four students and two advisors to New York. On the Monday after the conference, filled with new ideas and inspiration, the students tore up the plans they'd established earlier for the year's magazine. By then we had received over 250 submissions. In the end, the students created an outstanding magazine that was 74 pages long; it won highest honors from the National Council of Teachers of English and a silver award from Columbia.

The most important events of the year took place after the magazine had been printed. We again threw a party and sold the magazine at a reduced price. A few days later we held a potluck dinner (pizza was not on the menu) for the students on the magazine staff, the contributors, and their families. After dinner, formal awards and certificates were distributed. The students, parents, and grandparents wanted to share their favorite pieces from the magazine, and we spent about 45 minutes taking turns reading aloud. Sometimes serious, sometimes laughing, and at times with tears in our eyes, we read the students' beautiful works of poetry and prose.

In its fourth year, the club's membership grew to 60 students. I had resigned my advisor position due to a sabbatical leave, but in May I received an invitation to the after-school event to unveil the 1998-99 magazine. It is the best magazine so far, and plans for the future call for an even better publication, with more sophisticated prose, poetry, photography, and art. The magazine is hot, and students gain a certain status in the school if their work is published. The administration has been won over and a new creative writing class to produce the magazine will be offered in the 1999-2000 school year. All of this was accomplished through the dedication of ten activist students.

It is probably too late to stop the tidal wave of testing and technology that is engulfing our schools, but it is not too late for us to ensure that our students' feelings and ideas are not washed away. We can help our students work together to create literary magazines, newspapers, yearbooks, classroom collections of their work, and e-zines, and then incorporate their material into our curricula. This is one way we can resist the current trend of defining education in terms of testing and technology and in the process build in our students

a love of good poetry and prose.

Samples of outstanding literary magazines are available from the Eric Clearinghouse. Pizza places can be found in the phone book!

Author Information

Miller teaches in San Jose, California, USA. More information about the program described in this commentary can be obtained by contacting him by e-mail at Robert5181@aol.com.

Transcript of the Discussion Forum

Editors' Note: When this article was posted in *Reading Online* in August 1999, readers were invited to comment on it through a bulletin board feature that was discontinued when the journal was redesigned in July 2000. Following are the comments posted to that bulletin board.

Readers who would like the opportunity to comment on this or other articles in the journal are invited to contact the author directly or to post messages through Online Communities.

Post 1

Author: Brian_Martin
Date: 09-08-1999 16:42

I am in agreement with this article: demonstrated aptitude on standardized tests or technology does not mean that students are being educated. I think that this magazine was beneficial for the students because it gave them a shared purpose or goal. They had to think through the problems they encountered and create new ideas to present it to the student body. I'm sure those ten students ran into difficulties, dead ends, and frustration during that first year. They needed to ask questions, create solutions, and then carry those solutions out. Now if we could just take these same principles into the reading and writing classroom. We must convince students that reading and writing are worthwhile. We must ask questions, help them to create solutions, and then encourage them to carry out what they have learned. This is education. It isn't just a transference of knowledge, but an ongoing process of exploration, experimentation, failure, and success. Surely multiple-choice exams and technology are no replacement for this process in the classroom.

Reply 1a

Author: Genny_Haiworonsky
Date: 11-05-1999 19:26

First of all, I want to say that this article was a great piece on what education should be. As you say Brian, eduaction is a process of exploration and standatory testing tends to erase that creativity. I was completely inspired by this article- by the teacher and by those first ten students. Together they showed the spirit of cooperation, and worked to create something that had great meaning for them. Even more impressive was how this enthusiasm spread and captured the imagination of others. This was a powerful example of how learning should be- something that lights a spark and spreads to others. In one word- it is boundless. The article also showed the development of these students learning -as they learned how to work together, listen to one another, and produce products that expanded on each other. All of this is valuable - and this is where the real learning occurs. "Learning" inside a box (the standatory testing model) is limiting. It is not a cooperative form of learning nor is it exploratory. One answer is right- no room for exploration here. It is true that standatory testing and technology are aids, and can help to achieve certain things -but there is a lot to be said for creating something. For one- a sense of pride and achievement. This is what creates meaning for students . The students come away with something solid in their hands - something that they can look back on years later that will still be meaningful for them.

Reply 1b

Author: David_Andrews
Date: 11-11-1999 19:42

I would like to join the chorus of people who loved to read about the growth and development of the magazine. It was a great story to hear to balance against current tide of education that the author outlined at the beginning of the article about mandantory testing and so on. Education is so powerful when things are taught in context. When we focus on testing and work only on what will be on the test we not only deprive students of the 'magic' of things like literature, we don't even give them a chance to see that it is there. It was long after I graduated from high school that I became interested in literature for the right reasons. I didn't realize that lit was such a good way to expose yourself to the passions of the world, it was always just another thing to be tested on, despite the best efforts of some good teachers.

But what really got me inspired by the article was the number of people who eventually got involved in the project. So often literary clubs like these remain the domain of a dedicated few, not moving beyond the initial year stage of "ten activist students". But to hold a short story contest at a high school, a challenging one at that and have over 200 entries is wonderful. I don't know the population of the school at large but that is a great number of people who are learing to love language, play with it. and experiance the magic and passion that school subjects such as literature can bring.

So often, as teachers (or pre-service teachers like myself) we ask what we can do to make school subjects more interesting. This seems backwards to me. The elements of our society and world are already interesting. We must ask ourselves what we are doing to not give students a chance to see that. If people asked this question more, we would have less people demanding standarized tests and more wonderful projects like this school magazine.

Reply 1c

Author: Chris Anne_Bordewick
Date: 04-18-2000 18:34

I am in complete agreement with what you said Genny. Education can not simply be quantified into a printout of test scores. Education needs to be an exploration of the student and their world both inside and outside of the classroom. The ownership that we saw the students taking in this article was a great thing. Students will learn best when the material is their own. The learning process shown in this article was also amazing. When the students were shown as working together and listening to one another, I was elated. This showed a healthy classroom in full swing. This vibrance is what needs to be shown to those that think a classroom should be reduced to a bunch of numbers. "Learning inside the box" is limiting and stunting to a child's mind and spirit and is too often allowed to continue in our schools. Creating meaning in our classrooms is what our main goal should be, and that goal can be partially achieved through allowing the students to make their own world and by not succumbing to stuffy testing practices that mold our children into numbers.

Reply 1d

Author: Laura _Mould
Date: 11-12-1999 00:18

I agree with Miller that it is unfortunate that testing has become such a priority with in our current schooling. No longer are children learning things because they are interested and curious about ideas but because they need to do well on a test to get a good grade. In current schooling, the grades have become such an integral part of our school life that are whole future can be effected by what we get on a mandatory test. Furthermore, the marks often do not reflect our true understanding for a concept not only because most testing does not replicate real life situations but because tests are bias to certain types of learners. Often the learners, who do well on a test, do not understand the full concepts but have perfected discrete skills, such as memory, to pass the test.

As Miller says, learning has become directed by what we need to know for a test and not by what we need to

know because we are interested in the idea or it will benefit our future. How many times have we heard teachers say, "you don't need to know this it won't be on the test." It is sad to think that learning has become so directed by tests that learning for the sake of learning is not worth it because it is not going to be graded.

With regards to testing, I question what students are actually being tested on. As test are usually artificial situation it is difficult to test students' actual knowledge in an area. If our curriculum is being guided by testing (teaching children how to prepare for tests), are students learning the necessary skills and strategies that will help them be effective in their future endeavors? For many students memorizing the information does not require meaning, it just requires them to be able to spill out the information on the test sheet will little regard to applying the information to real life experiences. Miller's students were learning and applying writing skills to real situation and these were not skills that students would have to use only once but they were skills that would help them for a lifetime.

I believe that assessing has its place in the schools, for it allows us to know where we have been and how far we are from where we want to be. But who says that assessing can only be done by a test. Over my grade school years, I had been exposed to little more that test but as of resent I had a great experience in my pre-service teachering school where I was able to create a portfolio and a web page. Both had a form of assessment but what really mattered was how much I enjoyed doing the assignments and how proud I was of the final product. In these cases, time had no bearing; I was willing to put in as much work as I needed to feel satisfied by my results. Never have I felt such feeling in regards to test, regardless if I received a high standing mark or not. With this type of assessment, I feel I had a chance to take ownership in my learning and it was for more than a grade.

To further promote ownership, I think students can take a greater part in their own learning and assessing. With the right training, children should be able to assess self in some instances and in all instances help teachers set criterion for which they will be graded against. As a preservice teacher, in future, I hope that colleagues, students, and myself will work together to create new and inclusive ways to assess children's work.

Reply 1e

Author: Catherine Brett_Whitelaw
Date: 11-12-1999 19:43

I would like to add my consenting voice to the opinion that testing hampers students more than educates them. My greatest leaps in learning have occured through direct experience rather than through memorization of facts and terms for tests. I am more curious about the world and more interested in learning if I have the opportunity to explore and inquire rather than think that I have to fullfill someone else's agenda through memorization of their interpretation of a subject.

I don't think that we should think that we are so far from the Californian example of standardized testing for completion of highschool - what about Provincial Exams here in B.C.?

I think that standardized testing limits the scope of teaching. Why should we all learn the same thing? Should not good education stimulate people to learn about their world and not simply require them to know key facts (who decides what those key facts are?). If a teacher facilitates learning on a issue outside of those on a standardized test are those students therefore less educated/intelligent than those who pass the test because their teacher followed the issues/themes in the test?

Publishing results in newspapers and on the internet seems inherently against the aims of education. We have to ask ourselves: What is our goal in educating ALL children? Cooperation or competition? Empowerment or humiliation?

Reply 1f

Author: Stephen_Shong
Date: 11-15-1999 01:35

This article addresses a very important issue; the false belief that being well educated means being able to score high on exams. Often getting good grades is viewed as more important than the learning itself. There are many students who have learn how do well on exams but don't really know the material as well as their grade illustrates. Standardized tests are sometimes an artificial way of assessment one's knowledge and may not reflect a student's true understanding of the material. Students need to be able to apply their knowledge in real situations.

I have often heard students ask the teacher if the assignment that was assigned was going to be collected for marks. The logic behind the student's question is that if there were no marks giving for the assignment, then they wouldn't bother doing it. The students forget that the point of doing the assignments is not so they can get an "A", but rather for them to practice and understand the material.

I believe it is important for teachers to emphasize the importance of learning and have a variety of methods of assessment in order to have well educated students. As Robert Miller states in his paper Uniting Students to Subvert the Testing and Technology Craze, teachers must "convince students that education and academic satisfaction do not develop from computerized learning and test scores."

Reply 1g

Author: Tiffany_Walker
Date: 12-07-1999 00:27

I agree with many of the responses written in regards to the article, "Uniting students to subvert the testing and technology craze." Not all students test well. I would consider myself a well educated and rather self-disciplined person when it comes to school work. All throughout school I received extremely well grades and still do during my college years, however, no matter how hard I try and how long I study I cannot seem to perfom as well as I would like to on some of my tests. There are many factors that go into taking a test besides whether or not a student knows the information. It seems unlikely to expect that every student can perform well on a test on a particular day. Being from Ohio and having to take the Proficiency tests during 9th and 12th grade is a good example of this. Some students at my high school who received good grades in school, worked hard and showed an interest in learning were unable to pass the test the first time... probably has to do with the stress and pressure of knowing that they "must" pass it. Fortunately students are speaking out in regards to testing-- their opinions should definitely count because they are the ones who are effected. Why determine a student's knowledge on one test when there are various means of assessment that should be taken into consideration? I understand that students must be tested and can see how scores on tests can determine many different things about a student, but it's important to keep in mind how well students perform overall, not just on the day of the test. Also, throughout my education at the university level in regards to teaching at the secondary level, I've been taught that it's inappropriate to "teach to the test." Well, if scores are going to posted and a variety of things are going to be based on the scores in relation to a particular school system, I get the feeling a lot more people may be teaching to the test.

Reply 1h

Author: JoAnn_Tiemann
Date: 12-07-1999 15:23

I am writing in regards to Tiffany Walker's response to teaching to the test. I could not agree more with her in all aspects of the articls. I also was brought up in the Ohio area and know how much test anxiety a student has to perform my best on the day of the test. I too had to pass the 9th and 12th grade proficiency test in order to move forward and to receive my honors diploma. I, studying in the field of education, have been taught how ridiculous and unfair teaching to the test really is. To be honest, I had one 3 credit hour class that lasted for 16 weeks revolve only around standardized tests. I performed much research on this topic and found out startling statistics proving that tests do not tell an overall performance statistic of a student. How can one justify how a student is learning on one particular day that he or she has to take a test? Many students could have possibly had a terrible night at home, no breakfast, or even could have been beaten the morning of the test. This makes it completely unfair to them that they should have to be evaluated on a test that day. A student shoould be evaluated on an overall performance and not just one particular test. Teachers that teach to the test are slowly losing sight of the true meaning of teaching and learning. THey are losing

sight of having fun while teaching and having the students enjoy learning.

Post 2

Author: gabrielle_broers12
Date: 11-10-1999 02:04

I was astounded by the content in the introduction of this article. That the United States wants to legislate mandatory testing and post the results in local newspapers and on the Internet in order to improve schools and education is an appalling notion. It is also news to me that in California the students have to meet the requirements by testing in order to move on to subsequent grades and if one does not reach the minimum test score, he/she will not be able to attend higher-learning language arts programs. Instead, they will doing further courses on test-preparation. A reliance on formal testing alone will only teach children to memorize material which they will dismiss from their memories a few days after the exam. The actual concepts and content is not understood nor retained in their memories. Throughout my years in Junior High, I was never taught how to study properly for exams so that I could remember and understand the material. To get A's on my exams, the only effective studying method was to memorize. I continued to use this method in Highschool and University. To this day I still have difficulty remembering text or class material. There is also a danger that training your mind to learn and retain information in this way will hinder your memory in situations other than school. For instance, I have noticed that I need to write down everything so as to not forget errands, work or assignments. I also have trouble remembering content and scenes in movies or books. I firmly believe that my memory could have been more efficient if I had developed proper study habits. Although testing should be included in assessment methods of children, it should not be relied upon as the only method and should be used as a very minor form. This is illustrated with the magazine project in the article. Here students learned new knowledge and skills and were able to apply it to produce something that was valuable and meaningful to them. They were able to take pride in their accomplishments. This is a perfect example of a method of assessment other than testing. Through development of projects and activities, children are 'actively' displaying their ideas and knowledge and they are much more likely to retain these experiences in their memories.

Reply 2a

Author: Steve Cann
Date: 11-11-1999 16:06

This article raised a very important issue for teachers and students. The issue is that a few dedicated people can make a difference and can bring about change. The story of how the school magazine became successful should encourage us that a small group can inspire others and initiate change. It is important that we instill this value in our youth. We need to teach them to stand up for what they believe in and show them how to effectively get their message across. The only way we can teach this value is by example. We cannot sit back and let changes occur to the education system that we believe to be unbeneficial, unfair or unjust. I would encourage teachers and students in California to get together and voice their concern about the state-mandated testing. If they do not like where their education system is going, they must step up to the plate and fight for it. As we learned in this article, it only takes a few dedicated individuals.

In North America we are fortunate enough to have the democratic right to express our displeasure. One point that I must stress is that this voice needs to be heard in an appropriate manner. If the message is expressed appropriately, those in powerful positions will listen. Well placed letters, notifying the media, and peaceful rallies are a means of raising public awareness. The media is very concerned with stories about the quality of education our children receive. I am sure the media would love to follow the story of a group of teachers and students trying to make a difference. Most importantly we must not sit back and allow fundamental changes to occur to the education system without those changes being questioned and challenged.

Post 3

Author: Jane_Buker
Date: 11-12-1999 19:19

The idea of testing has always bothered me, and I am horrified by the situation described by Robert Miller, where "administrators are demanding that teachers spend more time instructing students on test-taking techniques and that they focus on content likely to be included in the test." If this is true, and if it is becoming widespread, then we should be deeply concerned. The aims of school should be to help students develop their curiosity, creativity, and passion for learning. Teaching for tests goes against these ideals, and probably harms students in the sense that they become turned off learning, or, if they happen to be successful test-writers, they develop motivations for learning based on the wrong principles (such as competition, or learning in order to achieve high results and the approval of other people, rather than for self-fulfillment).

The magazine described by Miller is refreshing opposition to the testing craze, and a motivator that helps students become excited about learning and literacy for their own sake. Another example of good teaching can be found in the article, "Double, double, not much toil, not much trouble: Shakespeare in the Middle School Classroom," by Claudia Anne Katz. This article, along with responses, can be found in "Reading Online."

Reply 3a

Author: Robert _Miller
Date: 11-18-1999 00:04

I want to thank you and the others for responsding to my article. The situation in California is worse than I described. Four high schools in our district have been designated as Immediate Intervention/Underperforming Schools by the State of CA. An External Evaluator will develop a plan for each of the schools. Then, the schools will receive $170. per student to implement the plan. If the schools don't improve by 5% on the next state test, the State of CA will take charge of the schools. They will reassign the principal and they can: 1) allow students to attend other schools, 2) allow parents to establish a charter school,, 3) resign the teachers, and 4) reorganize or close the school. The state test will be the curriculum in these four schools!

On a more positive note, we are having a great time writing dialogues. The first one was " You received 3 F's on your report card and you have been grounded. Talk your parents into giving you $20. and letting you go to the dance." The kids beg to read read their dialogues to the rest of the class. (and they all get to go to the dance) Our current dialogue is a satire on "Thanksgiving from the Turkey's Point of View." They make fun of thier favorite TV shows like "Touched by a Turkey", "The Jerry Turkey Show" and "Superturkey." We are having so much fun.

Reply 3b

Author: Nile_Stanley
Date: 11-30-1999 13:46

I find Robert Miller's article, "Uniting students to subvert the testing and technology craze," on the money! Here in Florida, reading instruction is being driven by the FCAT: Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test and "A Handbook of Instructional Activities for the FCAT in Reading."

Glad there are still some of us left who read and write to feed the mind and soul. Check out the poet websites: Poetry Alive! Brod Bagert, Michael R. Strickland, Kristine O' Connell George.

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If you enjoyed this commentary, you might also be interested in the following postings:

- Adolescent Literacy: How Best Can Middle and High School Students Be Supported?, a discussion topic built around comments by Carol Minnick Santa
- Comments on the Reading Excellence Act (U.S.), by Ken Goodman

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